

## diversion tactics by OpheliaMarina

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**Summary:**

The day Mike Wheeler and Jane Ives go missing starts normally and ends normally, but the twenty-two hours in between are kind of a mess.

(Moonrise Kingdom AU)

## diversion tactics

### Author's Note:

This went unbeta'd, so please forgive any editing errors. For pronoun clarification, all characters excluding Ted Wheeler, Scoutmaster Clark, and Hopper are girls.

The day Mike Wheeler and Jane Ives go missing starts normally and ends normally, but the twenty-two hours in between are kind of a mess.

It starts with Will Byers ringing the Khaki Scout emergency bell at about three in the morning, her little body bobbing up and down as she clings to the rope. Scoutmaster Clark has to peel her off it, and then set her on both feet when she kicks. "What is it, Will? It's- it's very early."

A bunch of yawning Khaki Scouts in half-buttoned uniforms have gathered around the bell. Will straightens her shirt, then snaps into a salute. "Scoutmaster Clark, Mike's disappeared."

The whole camp goes silent, except for Troy, who cackles. Dustin and Lucas push to the front of the crowd, and Lucas demands, "What do you *mean*, Mike's disappeared?"

"What evidence do you have of this, Scout?" Scoutmaster Clark says, more formally.

Will roots around in her pocket. "Mike wasn't in the tent when I woke up," she says, "and there was a note on the sleeping bag. I can't tell if it's someone else's handwriting. Mike's is terrible, so it wouldn't be hard to fake."

*Dear Will,*

*Don't worry about me. I'm going to be gone for a little bit but it's because I'm doing something really important. I would tell you more but I'm worried Scoutmaster Clark or someone else might find this note before you do. Please tell Dustin and Lucas that I'm okay.*

*Thanks,*

*Mike*

*PS: Do NOT tell my mom.*

“This is very troubling,” Scoutmaster Clark says, and calls Mike’s mom.

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Nancy has to be the one to call Chief Hopper and tell him, because her parents start screaming at each other as soon as Mom gets off the phone with Scoutmaster Clark.

“Hello, uh, this is Nancy Wheeler,” she says. “I’d like to report- Chief Hopper, is that you?”

“Maybe,” says a gruff voice that definitely belongs to Chief Hopper. “This better be an emergency, I’ve got enough on my plate tonight. Who is this?”

“Nancy Wheeler,” Nancy says impatiently. “My, uh, my little brother-”

There’s the sound of shuffling paper. “Your mother owes a parking violation fine, Nancy Wheeler.”

The yelling in the background is escalating. Nancy shakes her head. “That’s not important right now! My little brother is missing, he ran away from scout camp tonight and no one knows where he is!”

The shuffling sound stops. “Huh,” Hopper says. “What a coincidence. Jane Ives was reported missing about an hour ago.”

Nancy closes her eyes. “Oh,” she says. “Oh, shit.”

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“I think I can boost you up the side of the rock face,” Mike says, as she and El survey the five-foot high cliff in front of them. “And then you can pull yourself up. And I can hand you the suitcases. You think you can do that?”

El nods, then squares her shoulders. Mike nods, squats, and cups her hands together, readying for El's dirty-covered sneaker to land in them.

They both nearly topple over when El steps up, but through a combination of sheer will and a good amount of upper-arm strength on El's part, they get her up there. Mike starts handing up their luggage, which consists of two suitcases, a duffel bag, and a cat carriage full of Eggos.

After El pulls Mike up after her, which takes a good fifteen minutes, they sit down on top of the cliff together. Mike pulls out her map. "Okay," she says. "Well, we're here right now, and this is where we want to get to by tonight." She points to the big splotch of blue in the middle of the map. "It's probably another fourteen hours away by foot. Do you want me to carry any of your stuff?"

El shakes her head.

"Okay," Mike says. "Well, we have about three hours till the Khaki Scouts wake up for camp. Do you think your foster parents have noticed yet?"

She shakes her head again.

Mike nods, thoughtfully. "Good. Then we should be in the clear. I'd like to pitch camp here by thirteen hundred. That means four o'clock. How does that sound?"

"Okay," El says.

"You should stay hydrated," Mike says. "And keep tabs on your stamina. Here, have some grapes."

"Thank you," El says, and starts taking them off the vine.

After watching her eat for a second, watching the movement of her hands as El rolls the grapes between her fingers before eating two at a time, Mike says, "I like your bracelet."

It's a necklace chain, wrapped three times around El's skinny wrist. She pauses eating to look down at it, then takes it off, reaches out for

Mike's arm, and wraps it around her instead.

Mike looks down at it, then back up at her. She's smiling, but she says, "I didn't mean it like that. I mean, you didn't have to give it to me."

"I wanted to," El says, and eats another grape.

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Chief Hopper pinches his nose. "Okay," he says. "It is six in the morning, I have not had a cup of coffee, two twelve-year-olds are missing, and Jane Ives' foster family just called me to say that she is no longer welcome in their home. Now who is going to tell me what the hell is going on here?"

Three adults, five children, and one teenage girl all start talking at once. Hopper waves them all off. "I'm gonna point, and you're gonna answer. You. Short stuff."

"Mike ran off with the crazy girl with no hair!" Dustin says immediately.

"Because she's made *him* crazy," Lucas mutters.

"Mike likes her but she might be trouble," Will says. "I heard she set her parents' doghouse on fire."

Hopper looks between all of them, then sighs and leans far back in his chair. "Okay. Is 'crazy girl with no hair' Jane Ives?"

All of the Khaki Scouts look between each other, then Dustin says, "We don't know her name. Mike just calls her El."

"She doesn't seem like a Jane," Will says.

"Helpful," Hopper says.

"Excuse me, Hopper, but *how* is this helpful?" Mrs. Wheeler interjects. "These are children. My son is missing, we need to have people out looking *right now*."

He swivels his head to look at her, very slowly. “The best way of finding these kids is by using clues, Karen, not just by running off wildly in all directions. Anything I can find out about these kids and how they know each other, I need to know.”

Scoutmaster Clark raises a hand, then lowers it sheepishly. “Mike did ask earlier this summer if there were any new students coming in the fall. About a girl with a shaved head and a tattoo on her arm.”

Ignoring Mrs. Wheeler’s shrill, “A *tattoo?*”, Mr. Wheeler says, “I sure as hell don’t know why you’re not fired yet, fella, when you’re just letting your scouts run out on you willy-nilly-”

Scoutmaster Clark flushes. Hopper says, “Cool it. Scrappy, how did the two of them meet?”

“She snuck backstage at the Khaki Scout performance of the nativity,” Lucas says, then, crossly, “She wasn’t *supposed* to be there.”

“She came by herself,” Will says thoughtfully, “which was weird.”

“We all thought she couldn’t *talk*,” Dustin says, “because she just stared forever and it was super creepy. And then she asked Mike what character he was. He nearly crapped himself.”

Hopper digests all of this, then turns to Nancy, who hasn’t spoken once, who’s just sitting staring at her clasped hands. “Something on your mind, princess?”

Nancy looks up, opens her mouth, closes it. Then opens it. Then closes it again.

“There’s letters under Mike’s bed,” she says.

---

*Dear El, I hope it is okay that I’m calling you El, but I don’t know your real name and calling you Eleven feels weird. Thank you for coming to the Khaki Scout play. I hope you liked it. After you saw the show the thunderstorm ruined our set and costumes, so you came at just the right time. Enclosed is the program for the show with my friends’ names underlined and also my address on it, if you would like to send me stuff. It*

*is okay if you don't. Thank you for giving me your address, though. It's cool to have a pen pal. I was thinking about getting one from prison but I think having it be someone you know is better.*

(postmarked: A penny with a slash deep enough in it to almost saw it in half.)

*Dear El, Thank you for the coin, it's so awesome! It must have a really good story behind it. I wonder if you know the story or if we can make one up. In the story I made up, it was struck by lightning. Also, I asked Scoutmaster Clark if you were going to be in our class this year but he said he didn't know any little girls with an 011 tattoo, and he didn't have any idea about new students. Still, if you're going to be in the seventh grade, we'll see each other!*

(postmarked: A sloppy drawing of a child at a table with two faceless adults.)

*Dear El, I'm sorry your foster parents don't understand you. I think that's what your last gift meant. My family doesn't really understand me either. I've been trying to figure out what your name is so I can extend you a formal invitation to the Khaki Scouts, but then you might not like it so much. I don't really like it sometimes. Will and Lucas and Dustin are great, but the boys aren't always the best. Some of them can be total tools. Still, I feel like you're tougher than we are. My sister Nancy says-*

(postmarked: a small bronze pin with Mickey Mouse ears)

*Dear El, Thank you for the pin, I'm wearing it on my sash now. I hope my letters aren't annoying you. My dad says people who don't write back are probably annoyed, but I think you're different from most people. My mom says that a lot, that I'm different from most people-*

(postmarked: a shred of what was probably once a dress, dirty and lacy. a swatch. it has a lock of hair pinned to it)

*Dear El, I really liked your last gift even though Lucas said it was a threat. I understood it, though. The way things look isn't always how they are. I read this book once-*

(postmarked: a blank postcard of an empty beach)

*Dear El, I think so too.*

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"This is a nightmare," Nancy says. "I didn't even know they knew each other. I thought he'd gotten a prison pen pal like Mom kept saying he should."

They've relocated to the Khaki Scout camp to search for more clues, and it's mostly just led to a lot of frantic running around and yelling. There are police officers trying to corral the kids, Will and Dustin and Lucas are all streaked with dirt and their uniforms are coming apart at the seams, and Joyce Byers is holding Karen Wheeler as she shakes. Ted Wheeler has not stopped berating Scoutmaster Clark.

"Mike's not really a mysterious kid," Jonathan says. Her hands are in her pockets; Nancy's are wrapped around herself. "I think the weirdest thing is that Will and the others really have no idea where they are. Mike tells them everything."

Nancy shakes her head. "Why would he run away from home?" she says miserably. "I mean, he keeps to himself. But I never thought he was unhappy. Now he's gonna get himself killed."

"He's a scrappy kid," Jonathan says. "He'll be okay. Anyway, it kind of sounds to me like Jane Ives is the real issue here."

"I know!" Nancy says. "Who even is she? She has a tattoo? She's been kicked out of seven homes, apparently, and she's got *violent tendencies*."

"No, I mean how her foster parents aren't going to take her back," Jonathan says.

There's a sharp whistle, and everyone looks over to see Chief Hopper clapping his hands together. "All right, there's no point sticking around here. I'm gonna round up some more people and get a search going. They can't have gone far, looks like all that's missing is basic camping supplies. Curly, Spud, and String Bean, you're deputized until we find your pal."

Dustin and Will and Lucas all beam for about two seconds, until Troy



says, "That's discrimination! We should be the ones who're deputized, we're *cadets*."

"Don't deputize them!" Dustin shouts. "They're *jerk*s."

James takes a hard step in her direction, and she shrinks back behind Will. Chief Hopper steps between them. "Fine, you're all deputized. Wheelers, come with me. Joyce, can you help me get the word out? The neighborhood moms, you know."

She nods, even though she's already looking frazzled. Nancy moves to go join her mom, but Jonathan catches her arm.

"Hang on," she says. "A map is missing from the inventory. Mike asked me a couple of days ago about safe hiking trails."

Nancy's eyes widen. "What? Oh my god, we need to tell-"

"No, wait," Jonathan says, and she's determined. "Mike's a lot like Will, he's good at hiding stuff. Who do you think he's going to be more willing to talk to, his sister or the entire Hawkins police department?"

Probably neither. Nancy bites her lip. "Where do you think they are?"

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"Will you miss them?" El says. She's been silently kicking a rock ahead of her for about twenty minutes.

Mike looks back. "Who?"

"Your family," she says, and keeps kicking the rock, without looking up.

It rolls right up to Mike's heel, and Mike stops, waiting for her to catch up. "I don't know," she says. "I don't yet. Nancy can be cool sometimes, but mostly she's kind of a pain. She worries too much about what other people think. My dad's hardly ever around. My mom's just... a mom, you know. I mean, I already told you this stuff. Are you cold?"

El shakes her head, but Mike shrugs off her jacket anyway. She doesn't refuse it when it's put over her shoulders, just hugs it tight around herself.

They walk a few more paces, then Mike says, "Do you miss your family? Not your foster family, your real one."

For a while, El doesn't respond. Then she shakes her head. "Can't remember."

Mike's silent for a while. Then she shrugs. "Well, you'll find a good one. Eventually. Once we figure out where we're going."

"You," El offers.

There's a big rock in their path, wedged in the middle of a small stream. Mike steps over it, then helps El over. "Well, sort of, I guess. Friends can be like your family."

"Will you miss your friends?" El says.

They're still holding hands. "Well, yeah," Mike says. "But when we figure out where to settle and get everything worked out, I'll let them know where we are. They won't rat on us, and I feel like you'd really like them."

El looks at her carefully. "Not like the boys who cut you."

Faintly embarrassed, Mike shakes her head, and lets go of her hand to rub at a thin scrape on her arm. "No, no. They're really cool. Besides, they're not, like, really boys. They're... like us, you know."

A ghost of a smile flickers across El's face. "Good different."

"Right," Mike says. "Anyway, they wouldn't sabotage us."

"Mike! MIIIIIIIIIIIIKE!"

"Shit, that's them," Mike says.

All three of them come tumbling down the hill at once, Dustin rolling a little bit, Will waving both hands in the air. Mike grabs El's hand

again, like she's considering running for it. El just holds herself very still.

"Are you okay?" Will yells.

"Did Jane Ives kidnap you?" Dustin screams, even though she's right in front of Mike's face. She winces.

Mike blinks, then turns to El. "Is your real name Jane Ives?"

She shakes her head. Her hand tightens around Mike's.

"It is!" Lucas says, who had stormed her whole way down the hill. "Her name is Jane Ives and she set a dog house on fire and her foster parents have kicked her out!"

El actually takes a step back. Mike is dragged along with her, then says, "What are you guys doing here?"

"The whole town's looking for you!" Lucas says. She's still shouting, even though they're all just standing in a circle now. "Your mom is crying!"

"What!" Mike says, and looks, betrayed, at Will. "I told you not to tell her!"

Will lifts her hands up in self defense. "I didn't know if you were really safe! Your handwriting's terrible!"

"Well, I'm fine," Mike says, crabbily, "and El's fine, and we're not going back anyway so it doesn't matter that her foster parents don't want her back."

All of the girls start shouting at once, except El, who just keeps holding on to Mike's hand and looking around at the trees.

"Yes you are!" Lucas says. "You're coming home!"

"Where are you even going!" Dustin says.

"How are we going to finish our campaign now!" Will says.

Mike glares at all of them. "Well, I'm not going to tell you now that I know you're all a bunch of snitches!" she says. "Maybe I won't even give you our address when we get there!"

"Your address?" Dustin repeats, incredulously. "You have a *house*?"

"I thought you were in trouble!" Will says. "I wasn't trying to be a snitch."

"You're not going anywhere!" Lucas says, who's starting to get red in the face. "And that freak is going back to Social Services!"

Mike lunges at her, which is good timing because that's when El tugs her backwards and points up. Mike nearly falls over.

"Someone," El says.

Troy and James are strolling leisurely down the hill. The girls all turn around, and Will and Lucas step in front of the other three. "Well," Troy says. "Look at this. The queers reunited."

"Get out of here, Troy," Will says. "We already found them."

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you helped them escape in the first place," Troy says. "Anyway, heard you collected a new freak, Wheeler, but damn. Don't think I've ever seen a girl quite that ugly. That is a girl, right?"

El stays still. Mike goes even stiller. "Fuck you, Troy."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" James says.

Lucas bares her teeth. Dustin takes a step forward. "Get lost."

"Get loht," Troy mimics. "Anyway, we're deputized, so we have authority to bring you in with force."

And, too fast, she lunges in the space in between Will and Dustin towards Mike. Faster, there's a flash of silver, then scarlet.

Then Troy is on the ground, shrieking and crying, and El is breathing hard and holding a bloody set of fishing knives. She's still holding

Mike's hand.

Everyone, including James, looks at Troy, then at El. Then James takes a step forward, and Dustin tackles him.

"Run!" Will yells, as she and Lucas pile onto James too. "Mike, run!"

Mike takes one step back, then two. El stays where she is, eyes wide. Mike has to tug at her. "Come on. El, come on!"

Still looking back, she starts hurrying after Mike. They push through the bushes on the opposite side of the clearing, then they're gone.

Will, Dustin, Lucas, and James are left in a yelling, dirty pile. Troy continues to weep and scream on the ground alone.

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When Karen gets to the Khaki Scout emergency tent, she starts crying all over again.

"My son is out there with a *dangerous child*," she says, then, "where's Nancy?"

Dustin has a black eye. She says, "Troy attacked them first! The crazy girl was protecting Mike."

Hopper looks frankly down at the three of them. Troy and James are being treated in a separate tent, because Troy's mom has threatened a restraining order. "You mean to tell me twelve-year-old Jane Ives stabbed your friend with a knife in self defense?"

"He's not our friend," Will says stubbornly, "and he attacked them. It wasn't their fault. Anyway, Troy hurts Mike all the time."

Chief Hopper says, "huh," while Mrs. Wheeler says, "*What?*" "And... any idea where our two lovebirds got off to?"

They all look at Lucas, who has a smear of blood under her nose. She looks around, then down. "No," she says. "We got distracted and they ran off."

"Where is Nancy?" Mrs. Wheeler says, with more hysteria.

"Huh," Chief Hopper says again.

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It's been two hours since they last spoke.

"S-so," Mike says. "*Is your real name Jane Ives?*"

El shakes her head, hard. They'd washed their hands off in the river, and her hands are still dripping. She's just staring at the ground as she walks.

Mike nods, then seems to not be able to stand it anymore. "Why won't you tell me your name?"

She doesn't say anything.

"I mean, El, we've come all this way," Mike says, "and you know, I left my friends back there in a fight, and I'm running away from my house and my mom and my friends, too, and I'm doing it because I feel like we really understand each other, you know, but now I'm not sure, because how much can I really understand someone if I don't know their name--"

She stops, both talking and in place, when she realizes El is sniffing behind her. "El?"

El stops walking, and stares at the ground, shaking, hands curled into fists. "My foster parents don't want me back," she says, quietly, through softly heaving breaths, "because I hurt people. I hurt everyone."

"That's not true," Mike says, and her voice is steady again.

El nods. "It is true."

"No, it's not," Mike says. "You were protecting me. Okay? It's not the same."

"How?" El says.

Mike frowns. "How is it not the same?" she says, and El nods. "Well. I didn't know about the dog house setting on fire, but that doesn't really matter. Accidents happen, I guess." El snuffles. "And, like, the coin, and- and your hair, and whatever happened with your other foster families. None of that matters. You aren't *trying* to hurt anyone. Troy and James, they hurt people because they like it. You hurt someone because you were trying to protect me. I wish I could-protect my friends like that."

El's still looking at the ground. Mike ducks a little, trying to make eye contact with her. "Thank you for helping us, okay? You saved me. Thank you."

Clumsily, she comes forward and wraps her arms around El. El snuffles, and rests her head awkwardly on Mike's shoulder. "Okay."

"Okay," Mike says, and her voice is still even. "And- listen. It's gonna be different, when we get out of here. It's not gonna be like Hawkins. You won't *have* to hurt people. You can just be yourself. No one will bother us."

"Promise," El whispers.

"I promise," Mike says, like she means it, even though she can't really think of any place like that.

Then Jonathan comes crashing through the bush.

They jump apart, and she looks at them both, critically. "Hey," she says.

"We're not here!" Mike says, immediately.

Jonathan raises her hands, a peace offering. "Hey, relax. I'm on your side. I just wanna warn you that your sister's coming."

Mike wrinkles her nose. "Nancy? Are you sure she's not back home on the phone with Barb?"

"No, Mike," Jonathan says, "she's combing the woods and making herself sick worrying about you."

“Oh,” Mike says, then, to El, “this is Jonathan. Will’s older sibling.”

El nods. Jonathan nods back at her. From a short distance away, Nancy’s voice shouts, “JonaTHAN! Jonathan, where ARE YOU?”

Mike makes seven distressed hand signals in two seconds. Jonathan considers her, then shouts back, “There’s nothing over here! Go check past the other bushes.”

Rather than doing that, Nancy’s voice comes closer. Mike shrinks back. El shrinks back behind her. “JonaTHAN! I told you I didn’t want to split up!”

“I’ll be there in a second!” Jonathan shouts back, then, eyebrows lifting in a stroke of brilliance, “I need to pee!”

Nancy’s footsteps stop. “Ew, Jonathan, gross,” she yells. “Fine. I’ll be over there. DON’T take too long, I don’t wanna be by myself!”

And the sound of her recedes away. El peers over Mike’s shoulder at Jonathan with new interest. Jonathan looks back at her, then says, “What are you guys even trying to do?”

Mike says, “We need to go somewhere else for a while. It’s for El. It wasn’t personal to Will or Nancy or anything.”

Still looking at El, Jonathan nods to her again. “What about her, can she talk?”

“She can talk,” Mike says, then, snippily, “if she gets to know you, and you aren’t a jerk.”

Now El and Jonathan are both looking at each other with newfound respect. Mike fidgets between them.

Jonathan nods to El one more time, an understanding. Then she says, “You better go then. Here, take this.”

She hands Mike a cassette player. Mike takes it, bemused. “Why?”

“Going somewhere is better with music,” Jonathan says. “There’s a pretty good mix in there. You can get it back to me whenever you get



where you're going."

They both look at her suspiciously. "You're not gonna tell Nancy?"

"No," Jonathan says, and scuffs her sneaker, puts her hands in her pocket, looks at the ground. "I know how it is to wanna leave Hawkins because you're not the same as everyone else. Just don't make your sister worry too much, okay?"

Mike wrinkles her nose. "Whatever," she says, then, "okay, I won't. Just give us some getaway time."

"You got it," Jonathan says. "Remember to stick to the paths I showed you."

She's heading out, back in Nancy's direction, when El says, "Bye, Jonathan."

Jonathan and Mike both start in surprise, and when Jonathan turns back El's still looking at her expectantly. She smiles, a little, uncertainly. "Bye."

Mike gives her an appraising look, then tugs El's hand again. "C'mon."

Then they're gone.

Nancy gives her a dour look when she gets back. "You were gone a while."

"What can I say," Jonathan says, a little plaintive. "I was trying to be sensitive."

She gets an eye roll for that. "You're *too* sensitive," Nancy says, but she smiles, then says, "The path goes up this way, right?"

"Other way," Jonathan says.

---

The sun's starting to go down, and Mike says, "We should set up camp here. And start a fire."

It's the dead of woods, but it's still close to the brook. Mike sends El over to get water while she pitches camp, and it's up in about twenty minutes.

"Boil the water before we drink it, for germs," Mike says. "Then we can cook something for dinner."

El puts the saucepan full of dirty brook water over the fire pit, then pulls out one of her Eggo boxes. Mike considers it. "Well," she says, "I've never cooked an Eggo over a fire before, but it can't be that different from a toaster."

They're roasting waffles on sticks when El says, "You're good."

"At camping?" Mike says, without looking up, and shrugs. "Well, I've been a Khaki Scout for a long time. Nancy made Mom make me join because Steve Harrington was one, but now we're not even in the same troop."

For a while longer, El's quiet. Then she says, "Nancy."

"I know," Mike says. "I didn't think she'd care so much either. It's not like she ever cares while I'm around. She and Mom weren't even supposed to know till tomorrow, I'm so mad at Will. This is so much harder than it was supposed to be. Make sure you're drinking water, okay?"

It takes a moment, but El puts down her Eggo and takes a long drink out of Mike's canteen. She swallows, wipes her mouth with the back of her hand, and says, "You should go home."

Mike's Eggo catches fire. She says, "What? No! No, we're not going home. We've come so far already."

"Not us," El says. "You."

For a second, Mike just gapes at her. Then she shakes her head. "No! No, okay? I'm not going home, you can't be out here by yourself. We planned this out for weeks, El, okay, we need each other. We're not splitting up. I'm not gonna leave you out here alone."

"Your family," El whispers. She doesn't look at Mike. She keeps

watching the waffle burn.

“Screw my family!” Mike says, passionately, and shakes the burning waffle off the stick and right into the fire. El looks like she might cry. “They don’t get it, okay, none of them get it, and it’s not *about* them. This doesn’t have anything to do with them! It’s about you and me, okay, it’s not just you, it’s me. We’re going to a new place for me too, not just you. So we don’t have to be who people want you to be, like Jonathan says.”

El snuffles, and she still won’t look up. Mike scoots closer to her on the log, looking very hard at her face. “And- and what if we split up and we never see each other again? If we split up, I won’t know where you go, or if- if you get captured, or anything, and then I’d never know what happened to you. We can’t do that.”

The second waffle catches flame, and El gasps, swings it around and nearly tosses it on the ground. Mike blows it out, takes it off the stick, and holds onto it. “El, we can’t split up. Understand? I don’t want us to split up.”

She offers the waffle to El, and El, still shaking a little, takes it. Then, clumsily, Mike leans over and presses her lips to El’s.

That’s when Chief Hopper, the Wheelers, the Byers, the Hollands, and the entirety of Khaki Scout Troop 307 tumbles out of the brush next to them.

Pretty much everyone screams.

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They put Mike and El in separate cop cars to take them home. Mike has to be carried in, kicking and yelling, but El just glares until Chief Hopper shuts the car door in front of her.

Karen keeps hugging Mike once they’re all piled into the car, even though she keeps kicking and squirming. “Oh, honey, thank god you’re okay,” she says tearfully, then she smacks her over the head. Then she hugs her again. “What on earth were you thinking, young man? You could have been killed!”

“Where’s El going?” Mike shouts, and kicks Nancy in the shin. She yelps, and swats Mike on the shoulder. “Where’s she going? Where are they taking her?”

Ted and Karen look at each other. “She’s going with Chief Hopper for now,” Karen says, “then Social Services will pick her up tomorrow.”

“You will never see that little girl again,” Ted says waspishly.

“No!” Mike says, and shoves her mom off. “No, she can’t! They’re going to send her to juvenile hall!”

“You’re lucky we’re not sending you there,” Ted says, then, “and considering Jane Ives’ track record, that’s exactly where that girl belongs.”

Mike stills. Nancy winces, and says, “Dad, enough, okay.”

“I hate you,” Mike says, and draws her arms around her knees, hugging herself.

“You’ll get over that,” Ted says. “Also, you’re grounded.”

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The rest of the Khaki Scout girls are gathered in Will’s room at the Byers’ house. There’s an empty seat for Mike in the middle, and one for Lucas, because she’s standing at the window. The space feels very large.

“Well,” Dustin says, “sounds like we’re still not gonna be able to finish our campaign. Or probably see Mike ever again.”

“This is my fault,” Will says, flopping back onto her bed. “I should’ve hidden the letter. Or ripped it up. Or eaten it.”

“No,” says Lucas, who’s still gazing out the window. “Damn us. This is all of our fault. Damn us.”

Both Will and Dustin swivel their necks to look at her. Lucas turns around, and leans both hands back against the window sill, glaring.

"Mike was keeping this Jane Ives thing a secret from us for months, and none of us noticed," she says. "They were planning to run away together, and Mike is keeping all this stuff inside, and we're best friends and none of us noticed! And then we sabotaged their getaway. What kind of friends are we?"

They all contemplate that for a moment. "Not really good ones," Dustin says meekly.

Lucas nods. "That's right," she says stoutly. "So we gotta make it up to Mike. And Jane, or whatever her name is." She holds up three fingers. "Scout's honor."

The other two automatically hold up three fingers in response, then Dustin sighs. "Okay, yeah, but how?"

Will bites her lip. "Let's ask Jonathan," she says.

---

El draws her hand over the pictures on Hopper's mantle. "Pretty," she murmurs.

Hopper looks up from where he's scrambling eggs. "Yeah," he says. "That's my daughter Sarah. You'll be staying in her room."

Fingers tracing Sarah's face, El says, "Where is she?"

"In heaven," Hopper says, and dumps all the eggs onto El's plate. "Order up."

Her hand falls away from the photos, and she comes back into the kitchen.

They sit at the counter for a while, El eating silently with a spoon and Hopper just watching her. Finally, he says, "Can I ask you something?"

She doesn't answer. He doesn't wait long for a response. "How come your rap sheet is so long, short stuff? You're too young to be in as much trouble as you're in."

She just shrugs, and takes another big bite of the eggs. Hopper chuckles, a little. "Yeah, okay. Seems like juvenile hall is gonna have its hands full with you."

At that, El pauses, and puts her spoon down. The grudging smile falls off Hopper's face. "Hey, chin up. It won't be as bad as your ragamuffin pals are telling you it is."

El shakes her head, but doesn't elaborate. Hopper waits, then seems to give up on it, gets up and goes over to make himself a piece of toast. "Another question. Why pick Mike Wheeler as your partner in crime? The Wheelers are possibly the least rebellious family in Hawkins."

He's still facing the toaster when El says, "She-" and then stops.

Hopper turns back around to see El still staring down at her eggs. Behind her, the toaster starts to smoke. "I'm talking about Mike Wheeler, here."

El nods. "She-" she tries again, then shakes her head, frowning, at a loss for words. Finally, she just puts her hand over her heart, as if to explain, and looks up at Hopper with big inquiring eyes. "Understand?"

"Uh," Hopper says. "No. But I appreciate that you're trying."

His smoke detector goes off.

---

Mom, Dad, and Nancy are all shouting at each other downstairs. Mike is lying face-up on her bed.

"-should be sent away maybe, to a boarding school, until he figures out-" That's Dad.

"We are *not* sending Mike to boarding school, are you out of your mind?" That's Mom.

"I can't believe you. It's because you guys are like this that Mike ran away in the first place." That's Nancy.

Mike rolls over, onto her side.

“Are you implying that you know what’s best for Mike, Nancy?” Dad.

“I’m saying that neither of you know Mike at all, because if you did you would know why those two tried to run away together, and if you don’t know Mike then there’s no way of fixing this problem-” Nancy.

A laugh. It’s not even a mean laugh. “I think Mike is a little boy with his first crush and he took advantage of-”

“No!” That’s Nancy.

“Ted, that is not what this is about-” That’s Mom.

“Mike? Mike!” That’s a voice from behind her.

Mike rolls over so fast she falls off her bed. Wincing, she lifts herself up on her hands to see Will struggling to lift up the windowpane, then leaning against the frame. “Will! What are you doing here?”

Apparently Will is sitting on Dustin’s shoulders; Mike can see hands on Will’s thighs, hoisting her up. “Emergency Khaki Scout meeting,” Will says, and she is still in full uniform. “At my house.”

The yelling is still loud downstairs. Mike looks back at the door. “I’m grounded.”

“My mom won’t tell,” Will says. “She thinks it’s bullshit, what’s going on. Come on. We want to help.”

When Mike goes to the window and slides her legs out, Lucas is there, easing her down onto the ground. When she’s landed, they look at each other.

“I thought you didn’t like Eleven,” Mike says.

Lucas chews her lip. “I was being a jerk.”

“Okay,” Mike says, and they head to the Byers house.

---

They're all sitting around the Byers dining room table. Jonathan and Mrs. Byers are there too. "We really did think you were in real danger," Dustin says. "Otherwise we would've helped you escape. We're sorry."

"We're gonna make it up to you," Will says.

Lucas nods, and so does Jonathan, and so does Mrs. Byers. It makes her a little more hopeful. "Thanks. It's really cool of you guys to do this, considering I'm a fugitive now."

"Oh, honey-" Mrs. Byers starts, but Mike interrupts her by accident. "Where's El?"

All the girls look at each other, then Jonathan speaks up. "She's with Hopper. Apparently since her foster family doesn't want to take her back, so she's under his custody until Social Services come to pick her up. After that she's going to juvenile hall."

"Juvenile hall," Dustin whispers, half in awe and half in horror.

Across the table, Mrs. Byers' lips thin, and she stands up. "I need to go use the phone," she says. "Excuse me for a minute."

The rest of the girls lean in closer as soon as she's gone. "We have to break her out," Mike says. "She can't go to juvenile hall, that's crazy."

"We agree," Will says. "So we're gonna help you escape for real. Us and Jonathan came up with a plan. First, Jonathan's going to call Steve Harrington at the Ambassador Khaki Scout camp. Then, we break Jane out."

Mike frowns. "She doesn't like being called Jane."

Will winces, and the other girls have the grace to look contrite. "Oh. Okay. Sorry."

"It's cool," Mike says. "But how is *Steve Harrington* going to help us?"

"Steve's *going* to help," Jonathan says firmly. It sounds more like a



threat than a fact. "I'm going to call Nancy too. And before you give me that look, trust me, it's better to have your sister on your side rather than against."

They all contemplate the time Nancy concussed Tommy H with a baseball bat last year, only possibly by accident, and then agree.

---

The stars are out by the time they sneak off to Hopper's house. It takes a couple tries to find which window is El's, and one very close call with Hopper in the bathroom before they get it right.

Eventually, though, they find it because it's pink, and also because El's standing right at the window, just staring out. Mike nearly falls off Dustin's shoulders, she's so startled. "El!"

El sees her, and her expression blossoms out of blankness, not into a smile but into something big. She stays where she is. "Mike."

"We're breaking you out but for real this time," Mike says, and budes the window up higher. "Everyone's going to help. Come on."

She reaches out to beckon, and El takes both her hands. Mike looks down at where they clasp, back up at El, then flushes. "Okay. Be careful. Lucas and Will are going to help you out."

They do. Once El's on the ground, Lucas reaches out. "I'm sorry for calling you a freak," she says. "It was misdirected. If Mike likes you so much, you must be cool."

"Thank you," El says politely, and she shakes Lucas's hand so bygones are bygones.

"We need to go," Mike says. "Jonathan has a getaway car ready. We're going to the Ambassador camp first."

They start hustling, ducking their heads down. "The Ambassador camp?" El whispers.

"Where Steve goes," Will says, as if that explains everything.

"It's where older scouts who aren't counselors go to camp," Mike says. "Anyway, Steve and Nancy are coming too and we'll figure something out from there."

Dustin says, with barely hidden glee, "I've never been to the Ambassador Khaki Scout camp before."

"It's dirty," Will says.

They all pile into the car, Will in the shotgun seat, and there are only three seats in the back and four of them so they all kind of have to sit on each other. It's not too bad, except Lucas has a bony butt. "Welcome back, El," Jonathan says, and starts the car.

El falls asleep on Mike's shoulder during the drive. Mike smiles, too much to hide it, and the other girls want to make fun of her but because of scout's honor they can't for another twelve hours.

---

"So here's the plan," Steve Harrington says. "We're gonna steal a *boat*."

"What the hell, Steve," Jonathan says.

"You're an idiot, Steve," Nancy says.

"That's the coolest thing I've ever heard," Dustin says in awe.

Steve only takes the last comment into account, and nods impressively. "Right? It'll be great. I can steer it, we can all take it for a ride. We can drop little Wheeler and his girl off on the other side and they'll get a killer head start on the fuzz, then we can circle around and get back here and no one will be any the wiser."

Mike looks at El, who nods, and so she turns back to Steve. "Okay, sounds good."

"No, it does not sound good!" Nancy says. "First of all, if we all try to get into this boat, it will sink, and we will die."

Looking actually offended on the behalf of the boat, Steve says, "Hey,

old Bertha's sturdy. She won't sink. She holds twelve Khaki Scouts a day."

"Your boat's name is Bertha?" Jonathan repeats incredulously.

Will shrugs. "That's a good name for a boat."

"It's *terrible*," Lucas says. "But it's an okay plan overall. I vote yes."

Because Will is scoutmaster-in-training, she's the one that calls for a vote. "Hands up for the boat plan."

Everyone except Jonathan and Nancy raise their hands. "Overruled!" Steve says, too gleeful. "Okay, kiddos, let's go."

Jonathan and Nancy watch the kids tromp excitedly after the easily most excited Steve. "We're going to die out there," Jonathan says, mildly.

"Steve's only allowed to die if I'm the one that kills her," Nancy says. "Come on."

---

They've been out on the boat for about half an hour when Nancy says, "Mike, why are you doing this?"

El has Mike's jacket over her shoulders again. They're all huddled together for warmth, except Steve who's manning the helm, and every so often one person will stick their hands out to breathe misty air onto them. El's hands haven't left the hem of Jonathan's jacket or Mike's left hand.

Mike finishes breathing on her right hand, then shrugs. "I told you. El can't go to juvenile hall. She needs someone to watch out for her when she goes on the run."

"I know, but," Nancy says, then hesitates. "Why does it have to be *you*?"

The quiet chatter that's been filling the boat eases into silence, and everyone turns to stare at Mike. Even Steve looks over with interest,

tilting back to see the group more clearly. Mike shrugs again, more bashful this time.

“It just has to be,” she says. “When El and I met, the first time... it’s hard to explain. But something happened. We knew we were the same, I guess.”

There’s a reverential hush as she speaks. “The same what?” Lucas says.

“Just the same,” Mike says. “Like, I don’t know, how the four of us are kind of the same, you know? But not just like that. It was more.”

“Good different,” El supplies helpfully.

“Yeah,” Mike says. “It was like we understood each other without having to talk. Like, I knew she wasn’t bad or dangerous even though everyone says she is. And she knew I wasn’t... I don’t know. What I look like. It was nice to talk to someone about that. So when we knew we’d get split up if we didn’t go somewhere else, it only made sense to run away. I told Jonathan earlier, it wasn’t personal to anybody. Not to you guys or to Mom or even to Dad. It was just what we had to do.”

For the first time, El looks up, and gives everyone on the boat a long, lingering look. “I’m very sorry,” she says quietly.

All the Khaki Scouts shake their head. “You don’t have to apologize about how you feel,” Jonathan says.

Nancy, meanwhile, looks troubled. “Mike,” she says, awkwardly, “you could tell *me* that stuff.”

“Yeah, or us,” Dustin says. “We’d *listen*.”

Mike shakes her head. “That’s not what I mean, it’s not the same,” she says, frustration starting to leak into her voice. “It was like I didn’t even know I needed to say that stuff before El. Everything I’ve told you guys was true. It was just more.”

Everyone’s quiet, digesting that, then El says, “She loves you all very much.”

They all stare at her, in transfixed silence, before Steve shouts, "Okay, my arms are getting tired as *fuck*, someone take over."

Jonathan sighs, and stands up, rocking the boat. "There are kids in this boat, you asshole," she says, and switches out with her.

There's another moment of silence as Steve and Jonathan shift, then Dustin says, "I wanna play I Spy."

Really there's not much to spy other than trees, but they make do. El settles back against Mike's shoulder. Mike is the one to fall asleep this time.

---

When she wakes up, the boat has docked on the opposite beach, and Chief Hopper, Mrs. Wheeler, and Mrs. Byers are all there again. "Shit!"

"You kids really are idiots," Hopper says, "but kudos to you for trying it."

"Nancy Wheeler," Karen says, "you are grounded forever. Mike, you are grounded forever plus infinity."

El's hand tightens around Mike's. Everyone in the boat stays very still.

"Yeah," Hopper says, "sounds like you're all grounded. Including you, hotshot."

Steve groans.

"You guys really couldn't wait one minute for me to get off the phone?" Mrs. Byers says, arms crossed and nose scrunched. "For Pete's sake, Jonathan! Will! We gotta have a little faith around here, okay?"

Jonathan and Will both look down and scuff their shoes in the exact same motion. "Sorry, Mom."

"That's right," she says. "Out here stealing boats and messing around

when I'm on the phone trying to sort everything with Social Services-

Both El's and Mike's heads snap up. "What?" Mike says. "Mrs. Byers, what?"

"Mike, really," Karen says.

"Well," Mrs. Byers says, and she's trying to still look stern but she has enough laugh lines that it's hard to hide a smile. "Jonathan, Will, I hope you won't mind having someone else around the house for a while-

"That's right, that's right," Hopper says, over various noises of shock, distress, and joy. "Joyce is fostering chatterbox from now on, okay, so can we please all just go to bed."

El's tugging hard on Mike's sleeve. "Mike. Mike?"

Mike turns to face her, beaming, face glowing in the moonlight. "Mrs. Byers is going to *foster you*," she says. "You're going to live with her and Jonathan and Will and you're going to stay here. You're going to stay here! Do you understand?"

Before El can answer, Mike's already hugging her, the thick layers of their clothes squeaking together. Dustin piles on eagerly, followed by Will, then by a grudgingly amused Lucas. Jonathan ruffles Will's hair.

"Thank God," Nancy says. "If I break out in zits because of stress, Mike, I'm gonna kill you."

Steve shrugs. "You'd never notice. You're too pretty."

"Just don't be in a rush to tell your father about this situation," Karen says, to the group hug at large. "I doubt he'll be too understanding. But frankly, at this point, I don't give a damn."

Mike's head pops up briefly to say "You're so cool, Mom!", and Joyce laughs.

---

“Scoutmaster Clark says you’ll be in his class in September,” Mike says. “So we’ll both be there. With Will and Dustin and Lucas too.”

El smiles at her. “Together,” she says, and Mike beams and nods.

It’s ten minutes before camp starts. Mike is hanging off the Byers window, feet dangling, arms crossed on it. “I better get going,” she says. “Is Mrs. Byers taking you clothes shopping today?” When El nods, she does the same, solemnly. “Make sure to get warm stuff. Winter can get pretty chilly in Hawkins.”

“I will,” El says. “Thank you.”

Mike nods one more time. “Okay,” she says. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Bye.”

Neither of them move. El’s lips quirk up. “Bye,” she says.

“Bye,” Mike says again, and she’s grinning too. Still neither of them move.

El moves to her dresser, pulls out a particularly polished rock, returns to the window and presses it into Mike’s hand. “Bye,” she says, and now she’s full-fledged smiling.

Mike puts the rock in her pocket. “Bye,” she says, one more time, then, one more time, “see you tomorrow.”

Then she falls off the window, and out of sight.

### **Author's Note:**

if you're into the fact that all stranger things  
characters are trans lesbians come follow me on  
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